

# Reporting domestic abuse in the media

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## Introduction

Women's Aid is the national charity working to end domestic abuse against women and children. We are a federation of around 170 organisations which provide just under 300 local lifesaving services to women and children across the country.

We are proud to work with the media to:

- Raise awareness of domestic abuse
- Campaign for better rights for survivors
- Amplify the voices of survivors
- To let those living with domestic abuse know that there is help and support available

## What is domestic abuse?

Domestic abuse is an incident or pattern of incidents of controlling, coercive, threatening, degrading and violent behaviour, including sexual violence, in the majority of cases by a partner or ex-partner, but also by a family member or carer. It is very common. In the majority of cases it is experienced by women and is perpetrated by men, and we refer to women survivors in this document for this reason. However, all domestic abuse is unacceptable and all survivors need support.

(We work closely with charities that provide specialist services for male victims and LGBTQ+ survivors).

Domestic abuse can include, but is not limited to:

- Coercive control (a pattern of intimidation, degradation, isolation and control with the use or threat of physical or sexual violence)
- Psychological and/or emotional abuse
- Physical or sexual abuse
- Financial or economic abuse
- Harassment and stalking
- Online or digital abuse

## Language

### **Domestic abuse or domestic violence?**

Use domestic abuse where possible, as domestic violence can send a message that if you are not being hit, then it doesn't count as abuse. Coercive control has been against the law since 2015.

Images also matter here – showing a fist or woman being slapped reinforces the idea of domestic abuse being only physical, which is not the case.

### **Survivor or victim?**

Where possible, use survivor, when the domestic abuse is in the past – women tell us this makes a positive difference to how they feel about the reporting, and how they frame their own experience. We use victim when it is in relation to criminal justice – when reporting a crime or when a woman has been killed.

### **Minimising abuse and victim-blaming language**

Avoid using language which minimises or trivialises the abuse, excuses the perpetrator and/or blames the victim– e.g. “Jealous husband kills wife over cold dinner”.

Naming the crime or alleged crime, whether you are talking about domestic abuse, rape or sexual assault, is important as it shows you are taking it seriously.

## Using quotes to tell the story

Where possible, raise the voice of the survivor or victim – this makes a huge difference to both readers who have experienced abuse in the past, and those living with it now and deciding if anyone will believe them if they seek help.

- Use quotes from (or about) the survivor/victim, so she is the centre of the story.
- Don't give a platform to the perpetrator – quotes from perpetrators can be seen as normalising or minimising their behaviour. It can be traumatising for the woman and for other survivors of domestic abuse reading their words. It could make other perpetrators think that their actions or attitudes are acceptable.
- Remember that often perpetrators of domestic abuse are often very manipulative and their friends, family and neighbours might not suspect a thing. When you quote a neighbour or friend saying “he was so lovely, he was a great father” after he has killed his wife and children, it can play into a harmful narrative where he is not held responsible for his actions. Most homicides are planned, but the narrative can be changed depending on how this is reported in the media.
- Many domestic abuse stories come from what is viewed as factual court reporting – but there is a choice on what quotes are used, and what weighting is given to these quotes in the story.

## Identification

There is currently a campaign for survivors of domestic abuse to have the right to anonymity in the media, in the same way that survivors of sexual abuse have the right to anonymity.

Once a court story is reported, we have been told that survivors have been threatened by friends and family of the perpetrator. To compound the trauma, their employer and colleagues can then read intimate details of abuse, that can affect how they are treated at work, as many people don't understand domestic abuse and judge those who have experienced it. Also, if comments are enabled on the article, then they can read a torrent of judgemental and abusive comments.

While it is currently legal for survivors of domestic abuse to be identified in the media in court reporting, please:

- Listen to survivors if they ask you not to identify them or change the way their case has been reported – there are many good reasons why a survivor of domestic abuse could be terrified of being named in the press. They are managing their safety and the risk of further abuse from the perpetrator and/or the perpetrator’s friends and family.
- Be mindful that when reporting domestic abuse, if someone is identified then everyone that they know, including their employer, will see it and it will affect how they are perceived – so be careful not to excuse the perpetrator or minimise the abuse.
- Turn the comments section off on domestic abuse stories. As well as judgemental or negative comments directly affecting the survivor, it has an effect on those currently living with domestic abuse. If you see comments after a domestic abuse story calling the woman concerned a “liar” or “attention seeker” then it stops others from coming forward, as they think that no one will believe them and there is no point.
- Additionally, if you want to include a photo or article on a woman who has been killed in a historic domestic homicide, please contact her family or next of kin before running it, if you can – we have been contacted by traumatised families, when they have not been aware that their relative would be pictured or written about in a newspaper or magazine.

Level Up have produced guidelines specifically around reporting domestic abuse deaths here: <https://www.welevelup.org/media-guidelines>

## Statistics

Domestic abuse and domestic homicides are not one off events, they happen frequently.

Currently, on average, three women a fortnight are killed by current or former partners in the UK – but this more than doubled during the Covid-19 lockdown.

An estimated 1.6 women experienced domestic abuse in England and Wales last year.

Context and accurate statistics are important, and we have a research team constantly analysing new domestic abuse statistics – these are published on our website [womensaid.org.uk](http://womensaid.org.uk) or you can go to our press office [press@womensaid.org.uk](mailto:press@womensaid.org.uk)

## Signposting

Where possible, signpost – if you cover a domestic abuse story, you will have readers who identify with what they are reading and some of them will want or need support.

**Women's Aid run a Live Chat service between 10am-4pm weekdays, and 10am-12pm on weekends, along with other online services and the UK Domestic Abuse Directory for your local domestic abuse service at [www.womensaid.org.uk](http://www.womensaid.org.uk)**

- The National Domestic Abuse Helpline is 0808 2000 247 (run by Refuge)
- The Men's Advice Line, for male domestic abuse survivors is 0808 801 0327 (run by Respect)
- The National LGBT+ Domestic Abuse Helpline is 0800 999 5428 (run by Galop)

**If you are in immediate danger always call 999**